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AFFAIRS OF THE WORLD

BY WILLIS FLETCHER JOHNSON

PREPARATIONS for the Conference on Limitation of Armament proceed with the same fine discretion and seriousness of purpose that marked the act of the President in inviting the other Great Powers to what may well prove to be the most profitable international congress the world has known. It is not too much to say that not one false step has been taken, not one false word has been spoken, by those in responsible authority. There were some attempts, indeed, by those who were neither responsible nor authoritative, to make the Conference appear to be committed to courses which would have discredited and defeated it in advance. Chief of these was the persistent effort to make it popularly known as a "Disarmament Conference," which may have been merely stupid but which really seemed at times to be inspired by a malicious desire to misrepresent it, to arouse and to encourage expectations that it would undertake something which was in fact never contemplated, and thus to bring reproach and condemnation upon it for its failure to realize an utterly false standard. This was finally baffled by a note of sharp rebuke and correction from the Secretary of State. Another mischievous thing was the demand, somewhat blatantly put forward, that the American members of the Conference should be representatives not of the whole nation but of certain classes, federations and what not. This was admirably met and disposed of by the President in appointing four men who, probably above any other four that could have been selected, were meritoriously and authoritatively representative of the whole nation and its Government, without regard to section, class, or any other special interest.

The wisdom of confining the Conference to the five Great Powers is so obvious as to be challenged by none save a few who, with strange fatuity, attempt to contrast it to its disadvantage

with the much more numerous League of Nations. The chief result of that attempt is, of course, self-stultification; for while the League nominally consists of forty-odd members, it is notorious that all real power is reserved for a Big Five. The difference between the two is that the League is a close corporation of a few Powers assuming to dictate to all the rest, while the Conference at Washington will be a combination of a few Powers attending strictly to their own business. The logic of this restriction of the Conference is impregnable. The only Powers qualified to deal with the question of armament are the armed Powers. That is axiomatic. "Let Messieurs the Assassins begin!" was the shrewd response to a demand for abolition of the death penalty. If the world is to be freed from the burden of vast armaments, it must be by the action of the Powers which have such armaments. Moreover, from either the militant or the irenic point of view, these five are—with all respect for the others—the only Powers that really count, for the purposes now in view. They would have, if it were desired so to do, sufficient physical strength to impose peace upon all the world. So long as they remain at peace, there can be nothing like a world war, nor one that could seriously and widely affect the welfare of the human race. If they find and agree upon a basis for the limitation of armaments on sea and land, we may be sure that there will be no development of bloated armaments elsewhere.

Wise, too, is the Conference in its restriction of its agenda to a few practical subjects, relating to means at least as much as to the end to be attained. In this respect it presents a noteworthy contrast to some of those former gatherings with which it is almost inevitably to be compared. First of these, naturally, was the Holy Alliance, of a century ago; following, like this, the greatest war that Europe had thus far known, and consisting, like this, of a few Powers. Its essential faults were, in contrast to this Conference, that its principles were hopelessly vague and its practices entirely sordid. It aimed to have the world governed according to the principles of the Christian religion; though there was no subject on which men generally—and particularly the men at the head of those Powers—more radically and passionately disagreed

than that of what those principles were. It proceeded in effect to attempt to dominate and oppress other nations in order to serve the selfish interests of its own members. Another great international conclave was the Congress of Berlin, in 1878; which was one of the most cynically self-seeking and unscrupulous bodies that ever did homage to the principle "You tickle me and I'll tickle you!"—a congress which was the fecund source of the majority of the international bickerings, jealousies and wars which have since scourged Europe, and which could scarcely have been a more perfect *agent provocateur* of the World War if it had been called and conducted for that sole purpose. The two Peace Congresses at The Hague also demand consideration. They led to more results of practical beneficence to the world than any other such meetings which the world has thus far known, and failed to accomplish still more because of the very faults which the present gathering has avoided—the faults of comprising too many nations and of attempting to do too many different things. These latter faults reached their fullest and deadliest development in the late Paris Conference and the League of Nations which it created; aiming to include everybody and to attempt everything. The Conference this month at Washington will differ from its predecessors in consisting solely of interested, qualified and efficient Powers, in aiming at only a few specific and pertinent objects, and in seeking to attain those objects not by taking a blind "leap in the dark" toward them regardless of all that may intervene, but by "doing the next thing" with scrupulous attention to each successive step and means by which the end is to be reached.

"If you do not button the first button," said Goethe, "you will never succeed in buttoning up your coat." However far this Conference may or may not go, it purposes to begin by buttoning the first button.

The attitude of the League of Nations toward the Conference has been significant, as manifested during the meeting at Geneva held simultaneously with the making of the preparations for the gathering at Washington. On the part of some conspicuous delegates there was an air of dejection, of almost querulous complaint,

and, it is to be feared, of ill-concealed jealousy. Non-participation by the United States was again charged with responsibility for the weakness of the League and its failure to accomplish more; and a feeling of pessimism concerning the future of the League, even as a moral force, was not to be disguised. On the other hand there were those who frankly recognized the right of the United States to stand aloof from the League and to call a conference according to its own designs, and who cordially wished success to the Conference, as an enterprise seeking the same end as the League though by a different way. Most significant of all was the final determination of the League to undertake no action looking to the reduction or limitation of naval armaments, but to leave that matter entirely to the Conference at Washington, which was thus conceded to be better fitted and more efficient to deal with it than the League.

Proverbial "neatness and dispatch" marked the disposition of the Mandate problem. Changes had been rung for months upon the unfortunate loss which the United States had suffered through not ratifying the Treaty of Versailles, and in thus being excluded from any interest or rights in the vast series of mandates which the League had given over former German and Turkish territories. After the iteration of this folly had sufficiently run its course, our Government very quietly but very firmly and convincingly reminded the world that declining to ratify one treaty did not automatically abrogate another treaty; that by abstaining from membership in the League of Nations the United States has not renounced nor forfeited any of the rights under treaties or international law which it previously possessed; and that since the United States essentially contributed to the winning of the war and thus to enabling the establishment of those mandates, it was entitled to have and would insist upon having a voice in the administration of them. If any opposition has been offered to this logical and just requirement, information thereof has not yet been imparted to the world. Thus the sum total of the much-exploited disadvantages, losses and sacrifices which this country was to suffer through not ratifying the Treaty of Versailles expeditiously approaches the vanishing point.

More and more the Latin American countries appear to be losing their illusions concerning the League of Nations, and to be turning back toward the principles of the Monroe Doctrine and the Panama Congress of 1824. At the recent Geneva meeting Bolivia sought the intervention of the League for the settlement of her long-standing controversy with Chili over the Pacific Coast frontage of which the latter country deprived her as a consequence of war; a demand based upon the principle enunciated by President Wilson in his contention, in his "Fourteen Points", that Poland—and therefore Bolivia, argued the representatives of that country—should have free and secure access to the sea. The Chilian representative promptly announced that, on the basis of Article XXI of the Covenant—the Monroe Doctrine article—Chili would dispute and refuse to recognize the right of the League thus to meddle with a purely American matter. In the face of this, remembering Argentina's withdrawal from the meetings of the Assembly last year, and seeing that already eight Latin American countries were absenting themselves from this year's meeting, the League prudently refrained from intervening, but, with Chili's careless assent, referred to a commission the question whether it had any right to take action in the matter. If the decision is affirmative, it is assumed that instead of intervening *per se* the League will content itself with recommending that the disputants refer the case to the International Court of Justice which it is now establishing. To that Chili may or may not assent. We recall that the first case presented to the Permanent Tribunal at The Hague was the purely American dispute between the United States and Mexico over the Pious Fund. It is one thing to have European arbitrators or jurists adjudicate an American controversy; it would be quite another thing to have a European political combination meddle and dictate in American affairs. The postlude to this episode at the Geneva assembly was the blunt declaration by the Colombian delegate that his country would hasten to seek membership in a new association of nations on the basis set forth by President Harding, should the United States take the lead in its formation, and his expression of belief that all the other republics of South and Central America would do the same.

An auspicious step toward closer relationships between the United States and its southern neighbors was taken by the Pan-American Postal Congress at Buenos Aires, in agreeing that each country should be free to fix its own foreign postal rates, provided that they did not exceed a certain maximum. That, it is assumed, will mean in the near future reduction of our rate to those countries from five cents an ounce on letters to two cents. The former rate, now prevailing, is the maximum permitted by the agreement; the latter is not only our domestic rate but also our rate to Mexico, Cuba, Panama, the Dutch West Indies, Santo Domingo, and all parts of the British Empire throughout the world. It certainly seems illogical for us to send letters to Australia and South Africa for two cents, and charge five cents on those sent to Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil. Reduction of rate would temporarily reduce postal revenue, but in a short time that loss would be more than recouped by the increase in mail matter carried and, more especially, in the increase of commercial and other relations which would thus be induced. A uniform postal rate of two cents among all countries in the Western Hemisphere would be a most pertinent and efficient corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. Another perhaps still more important step in the same direction would be the adoption of a uniform unit of monetary value. We should not expect any nation to give up its own design of coinage or of paper bills, or its own monetary nomenclature. But under different names and bearing different designs the various coins and bills could all be of equal value. Such a system was adopted many years ago by more than half a dozen nations of Europe, with advantageous results. France retained its franc, Spain its peseta, Italy its lira, Greece its drachma, Roumania its leu, but they were all made of precisely the same intrinsic value and thus indiscriminately interchangeable. The convenience and practical value of this arrangement, in commerce and in travelling, could scarcely be over-stated. Since measures of time, of temperature, of electrical force, and other important things, are uniform throughout the world, and the extending application of the metric system is making measures of distance, area, capacity and weight similarly uniform, it certainly seems to be time to consider a similar standardizing of monetary values.